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The new politics of consumption: promoting sustainability in the American marketplace

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While mainstream policymakers in the United States have to date evinced little interest in sustainable consumption, this does not mean that a political agenda designed to highlight the adverse impacts of consumerism has failed to take root in the country. In fact, a considerable number of activities are occurring that are broadly consistent with the aims of sustainable consumption. Inchoate though these efforts may be, there are indications that some proponents are beginning to link up and to forge a more readily definable social movement. The following discussion considers these multifarious expressions in accordance with a tripartite typology: social and political protest campaigns, lifestyle reinventions, and public policy initiatives. Of notable interest is that efforts to problematize consumerism do not stem from environmental concerns, but instead evolve out of public unease regarding such issues as working hours, leisure time, and family life. This situation raises questions about whether the common range of concepts associated with sustainable consumption accurately captures political initiatives in the United States to forge a link between declining well-being and mass consumption.

KEYWORDS: sustainable consumption, politics, economic policy, environmental impacts, public policy, social values, market research, policy making, social attitudes, public awareness

Introduction

More than a decade has passed since the Río Earth Summit put sustainable development on the international policy agenda. Individuals and organizations with an interest in the concept have used this milestone to measure the progress that has been achieved formulating and implementing plans broadly consistent with the aims of sustainability (see, for example, Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000; OECD, 2002). Viewing the situation solely from the vantage point of the affluent countries, it is apparent that several nations have embraced the challenges of sustainable development—foremost among them the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden—while others have evinced much greater caution.

By virtually all accounts, the United States is an anomaly in terms of how its national government has sought to reconcile conventional policy objectives with the goals of sustainable development. The Clinton administration launched the President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD) in 1993 and its staff prepared a handful of laudable reports (see, for example, PCSD 1999). However, these initiatives achieved little public visibility and, in terms of their political influence, have had no enduring effect. When George W. Bush assumed office in 2001, his decision to disband the PCSD occurred with hardly any notice. In a recent comprehensive review of the uptake of sustainable development as a policy concept in the United States, Gary Bryner (2000) explains that:

> [F]ew political leaders have been willing to take on the broader questions of American values of economic growth, consumption, technology, land use, transportation, and individual freedom. Most Americans seem determined to view economic growth as limitless, constrained only by unwise policy or business choices. They resist strongly the idea that limits should be placed on material consumption, and exhibit tremendous faith in technological solutions to whatever problems confront them. Their strong commitment to private property rights places major limits on political decisions which seek to promote environmental ends but which involve limitations on established patterns of property usage.

In their comparative assessment of sustainable development in several affluent countries, Lafferty and Meadowcroft (2000) caustically conclude that, "sustainable development had had virtually *no* significant impact on the operations of the US federal government. It is not just that the term itself has failed to catch on, but also that core values associated with the idea—particularly the global equity dimension—have failed to gain even formal political acceptance" (italics in original).

There is no reason to dispute these claims and, if anything, the status of sustainable development in the United States has eroded further since these authors prepared their evaluations. The Bush administration has embraced a domestic agenda that seeks to systematically dismantle many of the country's cornerstone pieces of environmental legislation (Cohen, 2004; see also Pope and Rauber, 2004; Alterman and Green, 2004). On the international front, hard-edged diplomacy and military intervention have supplanted humanitarian assistance and political empowerment as the preferred policy options.

Yet there are indications that the status of sustainable development in the United States is not as dire as this appraisal suggests. While it is true the concept currently is all but nonexistent at the level of the national government, there are signs that individual states are moving, albeit with noticeable hesitation and little unison, toward fragile acceptance of some of the core tenets of sustainability. Several states, for instance, have launched their own climate change mitigation programs and others are beginning to grapple with the difficulties of discouraging suburban sprawl (Pew Center on Global Climate Change, 2002). Consistent with these efforts, a consortium of ten northeastern states has begun to negotiate the guidelines for a regional market to trade greenhouse gas emissions credits (Johnson, 2003a). For students of American environmental policymaking, this pattern of state progressiveness in the face of federal intransigence is not surprising. The historical record shows that, from air pollution regulation to managing toxic chemicals, the states have trailblazed virtually every new environmental policy idea implemented in the United States. It has only been after the states have demonstrated effectiveness, and an unwieldy system of differing state-based standards has come into view, that the federal government has taken action (see, for example, Andrews, 1999). With this experience in mind, the lack of enthusiasm for sustainable development at the national level becomes more understandable.

The intent here is not to contend that the system of American federalism is stealthily powering a sustainability revolution. Rather the claim is that policy innovation in large, diverse nations such as the United States is often not as readily discernible as it might be in smaller, more homogenous countries. Moreover, the constitutionally designed weakness of the national government in the United States heavily constrains opportunities for dynamic transformation. As a result, protest and local organization have been the engines of political change throughout American history. For these reasons, the study of sustainable development in spheres some distance removed from Washington, DC may yield more encouraging results.

Lafferty and Meadowcroft (2000) usefully disaggregate the admittedly vague and elusive notion of sustainable development into five themes: the integration of economy and environment, the development of strategic plans and monitoring programs, the design of opportunities for participation and stakeholder involvement, the internationalization of environmental policy, and the movement toward sustainable production and consumption. Because of the challenge the reformulation of production and consumption practices poses to the core values of liberal democracy, these scholars characterize it as the most ambitious component of the sustainable development agenda. This distinction helps to frame further the bold aims of the following discussion, namely that there exists in the United States not only underappreciated resolve for sustainable development, but that some of the most notable activities are occurring within the most demanding thematic sphere.[1]

To give credence to this contention that a new politics of consumption is currently taking hold in the United States, this study casts a wide net. The following discussion organizes a diverse array of developments into three broad categories: social and political protest campaigns, lifestyle reinventions, and public policy initiatives.

First, it is axiomatic to observe that the United States has been at the forefront of the recent wave of globalization (see, for example, Green and Griffith, 2002; Bhagwati, 2002). Some commentators, such as Fabbrini (2002), contend that political resistance to globalization is most voluble in Europe and elsewhere, and is often tantamount to anti-Americanism. Lost in these discussions of international campaigns to confront American economic and cultural dominance is the fact that similar configurations have coalesced in the United States itself—indeed the first major anti-globalization confrontation occurred in Seattle. While American activists, like their counterparts in other countries, have focused their attacks on international financial institutions, it is noteworthy that salient symbols of consumer culture (eg. The Gap, Nike, and Starbucks) have also been prominent targets. This particular facet of the anti-globalization movement in the United States promotes sustainable consumption through three separate (though interdependent) forms of social and political protest: anti-consumerist, anti-television, and anti-advertising.

Second, other elements of this new politics of consumption embody a less impassioned approach and do not display the same kind of zealous and animated fervor. Predicated more on the reinvention of individual lifestyles than on overt social and political agitation, this set of

[1] It is also important not to underestimate the monumental obstacles to sustainable development in the United States. For instance, income among Americans is more unevenly distributed than it has been in half a century and the country has the greatest income inequality among economically advanced nations. Moreover, while European nations have made considerable strides modernizing their environmental policymaking institutions during the past decade, the United States remains strongly committed to an increasingly ineffectual administrative model.

initiatives to encourage sustainable consumption comprises several different strands. The following discussion focuses specifically on voluntary simplicity, ethical consumption, and slow food.

Finally, sub-national units of government in the United States have begun to implement a number of policy initiatives that have the implicit aim of promoting sustainable consumption. To be certain, government officials have not aggressively employed a language of sustainability to advance these programs. However, the correspondence between efforts to develop local greenhouse gas reduction schemes, to rebuild local economies, and to discourage the accumulation of consumer debt dovetail very closely with the aims of sustainable consumption.

Protest Politics and Sustainable Consumption

Consumption has been a pervasive element of social organization in the United States and, over the course of the last two centuries, this lifestyle form has inspired numerous political responses, ranging from the home economics movement of the nineteenth century to recent campaigns to foster consumer rights (Mayer, 1989; Furlough and Strikwerda, 1999). In some respects, the social agitation of the 1960s was fueled by a rebellion against mainstream consumer ideology. More recent protest politics have had a similar edge, as adherents have sought to expose what they construe as the falseness and the lack of authenticity inherent in mass consumerism. The following section focuses on three expressions of this anxiety: anti-consumerist protests, anti-television activism, and anti-advertising campaigns.

Anti-Consumerism

Among some youthful and vocal adherents, the disparagement of mass consumerism as a set of social practices, as well as attacks against some of its most emblematic symbols, has become a visible form of protest politics in the United States during the past decade. Activists have yet to construct many of the institutional features of a social movement, and instead rely on boisterous pranks designed to malign dominant expressions of contemporary consumer culture. Proponents are often disillusioned not only with material icons, but also evince a more general disenchantment with contemporary society (Zavestoski, 2002). While this disaffection derives from numerous sources, for analytic purposes it is instructive to group them into three broad categories—social, economic, and environmental.

First, anti-consumerism activists in the United States contend that consumption, or more specifically over-consumption, is harmful to both the individual and the wider society (DeGraaf et al., 2002; Schor, 1998). This cast of mind asserts that personal attachment to inanimate objects is psychologically stultifying and that consumers should more appropriately invest in education and other projects to foster societal improvement. Moreover, they maintain that rampant egoistic acquisition diminishes community solidarity and encourages artificial competition to accumulate. Proponents of this view fundamentally disagree with neo-classical economic principles, and assert in contrast that an undue emphasis on material acquisition constrains socioeconomic mobility and lowers the societal standard of living. In addition to these ills, activists stress that consumption drains away valuable time and money, ruins physical and mental health, threatens religious faith, and undermines civic institutions. The largest beneficiaries of consumption, this critique asserts, are its ubiquitous advocates. Anti-consumerism is also highly critical of the mainstream media for their defenselessness before powerful advertisers.

Second, American anti-consumerism activists assert that lifestyles founded on mass consumption oblige people to assemble a large arsenal of inexpensive products, many of which are produced under exploitive conditions (Bender and Greenwald, 2003; Broad, 2002). The relentless drive for cheaper goods leads to the loss of local employment and to the migration of production to offshore locations. Moreover, this form of uncritical consumerism erodes spiritual and cultural diversity. A retreat from a goods-oriented lifestyle will obstruct the march toward international homogenization and reduce the economic pressure on developing countries to abandon venerable traditions.

Finally, contemporary American anti-consumerism alleges that to create a sustainable and healthy world for future generations it is necessary to strive for the diffusion of more modest consumption practices (Myers and Kent, 2004; Princen et al., 2002).[2] One of the major drivers of this sensibility is a concern that the export of prevalent American lifestyles contributes to numerous ecological problems. Activists are especially mindful about dematerializing their consumption practices as a means of reducing their reliance on natural resources, disposable commodities, chlorine-based products, agricultural chemicals, virgin wood, meat, dairy products, processed foods, non-durable appliances, and consumables attributable to exploitive labor practices. A key precept of this philosophy is the encouragement of relatively modest lifestyles on a global level, as this will lead to a more environmentally sustainable economy and will resolve social ills stemming from an inequitable distribution of wealth.

These three currents of anti-consumerism presently flow like meandering rivulets of a stream. Despite their different emphases, activists view their goals as entirely practicable, because unchecked materialism is, by this view, a constructed social phenomenon rather than an indomitable feature of the human condition. By disabling the powerful engines driving prevailing consumption desires, people can assert themselves and steer away from the destructive and manipulative forces.

The tenor of anti-consumerism in the United States is at once low-key and loud. It is quiet in the sense that it does not have an organized mass following to communicate its message on a consistent basis. Activists are also relatively unobtrusive because they do not

[2] Anti-consumerism activists are actually reticent about employing the term "sustainable consumption" because of suspicions about the international organizations that are responsible for its popularization.

customarily advocate audacious acts of vigilantism and violent confrontation. Part of the reason for its current status is that anti-consumerism, aside from its sometimes creative tactics, has yet to articulate an incremental program for achieving its political objectives. Anti-consumerism is also simultaneously loud in the sense that its recommendations and social commentary are markedly radical. Some adherents have also begun to promote strategies that are more aggressive and, in some cases, have used violence against property as a means of political expression.[3]

Anti-consumerism in the United States is not presently endowed with many of the organizational features commonplace among more established social movements. Few national organizations have taken up the mantle of this campaign as their primary mission, and existing environmental, social justice, and consumer organizations have been, at best, reluctant partners. Nonetheless, one prominent group working on this front is the Adbusters Media Foundation (AMF), a small, plucky group that has made strides to problematize consumerism and to give concrete form to an emergent social movement (Rumbo, 2002; Bordwell, 2002).

Based in Vancouver, AMF was founded by Danish-born activist Kalle Lasn in 1989. The organization currently publishes a quarterly magazine, entitled *Adbusters*, that reaches approximately 85,000 readers and has the appearance of an elite design magazine.[4] The publication's content is highly premised on irony and parody and is savagely critical of mainstream advertising, consumer products, and consumerism as a lifestyle. In place of paid advertisements, *Adbusters* publishes its own satirical versions of real print promotions, with the intent of using humor to expose the negative social, psychological, and environmental impacts of the products they depict. The magazine's funding comes from subscriptions, philanthropic contributions, and revenue derived producing promotional segments for Greenpeace.

Adbusters refers to its specific style of political expression as "culture jamming," a term coined in 1985 by a San Francisco-based music group called Negativland (Lasn, 1999). More specifically, the approach involves a kind of cultural jujitsu that seeks to turn the language of advertising and promotion against itself. Culture jammers also use civil disobedience and other provocative means to reclaim certain "strategic spaces" that have been appropriated for commercial purposes.[5] The specific spaces to which culture-jamming techniques are applied can be physical places, such as parks, promenades, and highways, as well as more subtlety psychological and cultural spheres. The so-called "un-commercials" that appear in *Adbusters* are creative caricatures of familiar advertisements and, as such, are paradigmatic examples of culture jamming. This mode of resistance has begun to transcend the clever lampooning of cultural symbols to include vandalizing billboards and defacing other promotional media.[6]

In addition to publication of its magazine, AMF occasionally organizes boycotts, store sit-ins, mass sing-ins, and local demonstrations to challenge mainstream lifestyles and to raise public consciousness. AMF's largest event, and the activity through which the organization is most widely known, is its annual Buy Nothing Day (BND). BND is held in November of each year and is scheduled for the Friday following the American holiday of Thanksgiving, generally regarded as one of the most vigorous shopping days on the calendar. Promoted as "a third millennium holiday–a celebration of simplicity and frugality," BND has become an international event, and the number of countries participating in it grows each year. An emphasis on leading more modest lifestyles is central to AMF's mission, and the group maintains that less commercialism is essential for peace and global sustainability.

AMF exemplifies the contradictory temperament of anti-consumerism. The organization is, on one hand, quiet and cerebral and, on the other hand, loud and confrontational. Supporters advocate non-violence, yet endorse the goal of undermining existing centers of power and forging new ways to think about prevailing norms. AMF's protest methods may be generally peaceful, but its stated objective is irrefutably radical.

Anti-Television Activism

After a slow start caused by the onset of World War II, television in the United States diffused at a rapid rate (von Schilling, 2003; Barnouw, 1990). By 1950, 3.1 million households were watching, and just five years later this number had grown to 32 million. Today, 99 percent of American households have at least one television, and more than 50 percent of children in the United States have a set in their bedroom. The viewing equipment has been subject to a regular stream of technological improvements—color, cable, video compatible, DVD compatible, pay-to-view, high definition, and so forth. Television watchers can now even subscribe to services that allow one to delete commercials and to record one program while viewing another. An enthusiastic audience has eagerly embraced these upgrades and made substantial investments to acquire them.

Advertising has been a continual presence on American television since the earliest days of the medium, and the magnitude of commercial promotionalism that occurs today is remarkable by any measure. Thirty percent of network news programming is devoted to commercials, and the average American views 20,000 broadcast advertisements each year. Despite consistent corporate

[3] For instance, individuals associated with the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) have destroyed new suburban homes under construction and, perhaps most famously, burned down a $12 million ski lodge in Colorado (Brown, 2003).

[4] Although *Adbusters* is based in Canada, American consumers constitute the its primary focal point and most of the magazine's subscribers are based in the United States (Lindsay, 2002).

[5] The group Project Billboard employs similar strategies to communicate anti-war and other messages of political protest. The organization was recently involved in a dispute with Clear Channel Communications over a provocative billboard that would be visible to participants at the Republican National Convention in New York City (Preston, 2004).

[6] At this point, culture jamming begins to meld with other more familiar forms of political protest associated with certain radical environmental organizations in the United States.

claims that these images do not increase consumption, marketing managers spent $40 billion in 1999 to develop and air their product inducements (Samuel, 2001).

A common social critique in recent decades has been to disparage television for its stultifying effects on viewers who spend long hours in front of the screen (see, for example, Mander, 1978). However, more recent appraisals adopt the opposite perspective. In fact, contemporary American critics of the technology insist that rather than contributing to passivity, television is notable for its motivational potential. It is an indisputable marketing precept that the comely images featured on television stimulate previously non-existent consumption urges. The role of advertising experts is not to promote this obvious fact, but to formulate the most appealing images and to convince viewers that material goods can satisfy their ethereal needs.

According to anti-television activists in the United States, this continual ramping up of consumption is not trivial. Excessive television viewing exacerbates environmental dilemmas by drawing ever-larger volumes of raw materials into production. The medium is also alleged to be responsible for an assortment of social problems. For example, even a family that watches an ordinary amount of television exposes itself to a heavy dose of advertising. Parents often find themselves having to work long hours to generate the income necessary to purchase the kaleidoscopic menu of goods that their children demand. These circumstances detract from parents' ability to foster meaningful social relationships and, to assuage the situation, the family watches more television and consumes more goods (Molnar, 1996; Fox, 1996; Boyles, 1998).

It was in the context of this emerging appraisal that a group of activists established TV-Free America (TVFA) in 1994. Prior to the launch of this organization, misgivings about television tended to find expression as part of larger initiatives focused, for example, on banning advertisements for alcohol, on ensuring programming with adequate educational value, or on prohibiting violent and sexually explicit broadcast content. TVFA endorsed a more basic agenda, namely one that encouraged viewers to disconnect the set.

Over the past decade, TVFA has evolved into the TV Turnoff Network (TVTON), and has continued to advance the perspective that excessive television viewing is highly problematic. With financial support from donations and the sale of products, TVTON serves as the educational arm for a more diffuse array of anti-television activism. For instance, the organization distributes fact sheets and coordinates special events to encourage alternative family- and community-based activities to replace long hours of television viewing. TVTON, as stated on the organization's website (http://www.tvfa.org), seeks to "shift the debate from concerns about television's content toward an understanding that breaking free of TV is a fun, liberating, and enriching experience." In other words, TVTON is not concerned with censorship battles or changing the content of specific programming. Instead, the organization is engaging with what it sees as the core of the problem—the need to reduce the number of hours people spend in front of their televisions. Consistent with this objective, TVTON coordinates two annual public projects—a long-standing initiative known as TV Turnoff Week and a newer scheme called More Reading, Less TV.

TV Turnoff Week (TVTW) challenges adults, teenagers, and children to forsake television for one week each year. It is important to recognize that the guiding purpose of TVTW is not to create incentives for participants to demonstrate their ability to achieve this objective in the narrow sense, but rather to create space in which they can learn first-hand how satisfying life can be without (or at least with less) television. Volunteer coordinators distribute TVTW facilitation kits to community groups, schools, and religious organizations that include "screen free" activities, pledge cards, and instructional materials for arranging alternative activities. TVTW has expanded its reach every year since its establishment in 1995. According to its sponsors, 90 percent of the respondents to its annual survey report that they now watch less TV than they did prior to participating in TVTW, and two-thirds of the sample say that the changes they have made in their viewing habits may be permanent.

Anti-television activists contend that excessive television viewing is one of the leading reasons for poor school performance among young children. In response, TVTON has developed its More Reading, Less TV (MRLTV) campaign to confront head-on the link between television and literacy. MRLTV is a four-week campaign sponsored by the Educational Foundation of America that is relayed directly to students in their classrooms. Youngsters are encouraged figuratively and literally to "Bury the Television with Books." In practice this means that for every book a student reads he or she receives a colorful strip of paper to affix to the classroom television. The intent is that, by the end of the month-long initiative, the class will have accumulated enough strips to obscure the television in its entirety. According to its promoters, MRLTV serves as an especially good incentive for children who rarely pick up books, and TVTON reports that "poor readers" are more than twice as likely to seek out a book after participating in the program.

In addition to these two initiatives, TVTON actively campaigns for the elimination of *Channel One*, the in-school television network that is mandatory viewing in most classrooms across the country. The organization disapproves of *Channel One* because advertisements are spliced into the regular programming and students have a difficult time distinguishing the educational content from the promotional inducements. TVTON also contends that *Channel One* is entirely inappropriate in an educational setting. Schools, for the most part, are the only relatively advertisement-free places in the United States, and administrators and teachers who allow this medium into the classrooms compromise the integrity of their profession.

The advocacy agenda promoted by TVTON includes several professional medical associations and is grounded in a large body of social scientific research documenting the personal and social problems associated with excessive television viewing. The following discussion organizes this array of adverse impacts into four

categories: youth problems, societal effects, negative outcomes for families and communities, and individual consequences.

First, children in the United States between two and seventeen years of age watch, on average, twenty hours of television each week—the majority of which is spent without a parent or adult present. Research suggests the existence of a causal link between the number of hours school-age children view television and academic performance (see, for example, Clarke and Kurtz-Costes, 1997). Based on this evidence, the American Academy of Pediatrics has called for reductions in the amount of television that children watch (Lowry et al., 2002, Hu et al., 2003). Aside from attentiveness in school, it is apparent that children who spend a great deal time in front of the television do not develop active lifestyles, and this has ramifications later in life (Crespo et al., 2001).

Second, anti-television activists are not blind to the positive social contributions that television in certain circumstances can make. For instance, the technology can break down the isolation of distance, deliver news and entertainment, and unify a large and diverse nation. However, they assert that television is responsible for bringing in its wake a host of intractable social problems. The situation is exacerbated in the United States because political culture discourages the kinds of public intervention—often in the form of restrictive regulation—that has been used in other countries. For instance, aside from broadcasters fears about transgressing viewers' sensibilities, there are few constraints on violence on television. By the time the average American adolescent reaches the age of eighteen, he or she will have seen in excess of 200,000 violent acts and 16,000 murders on television. This phenomenon is not limited to programming ostensibly designed for entertainment. Between 1993 and 1996, there was a twenty percent downturn in the nation's homicide rate, but a seven-fold increase in homicide coverage on network news. The American Medical Association (AMA) reports that many youngsters cannot clearly distinguish between real life and fantasy because they are conditioned by television violence from a very early age. In response, the AMA has begun to assert that public policymakers should treat violence on television in the same way as they promote seatbelts and bicycle helmets.[7]

Third, anti-television activists contend that evidence links excessive viewing with a variety of negative outcomes for families and communities. They argue that the ubiquity of television has undermined interpersonal relationships because the technology offers the opportunity for virtual relationships with fictional characters, and these interactions then become substitutes for displaced family and communal contacts (Schor, 1998). Though it is hard to determine the extent to which the observation might be tainted by nostalgic yearnings, proponents of reduced television viewing point out that in earlier eras dinnertime was an opportunity for busy families to catch up with one another. What is somewhat more reliable is social survey data indicating that today forty percent of families watch television while eating their evening meal.

Fourth, heavy television viewing appears to be taking a heavy toll on viewers' physical health, and medical studies have correlated certain ailments with precursor conditions, especially obesity. Anti-television activists highlight one recent study finding that, as television viewing increases, exercise drops off and consumption of snack foods grows. These circumstances contribute to weight gain and an affinity for passive recreation. Individuals who watch television for more than three hours per day are twice as likely to be obese as those who viewed it for less than one hour per day (Coon et al., 1998).

Finally, anti-television activists have begun to problematize television in much wider social and political terms. Some groups assert that the technology has a perverse effect because the major networks receive de facto subsidies in excess of $70 billion from political candidates who use public funds and contributions to purchase campaign commercials. This arrangement creates a system in which only electoral contestants who can afford to pay for television airtime have any chance of success. As such, television has become one of the driving forces sustaining the political status quo.[8]

Anti-Advertising Campaigns

As noted above, advertising is an omnipresent and unavoidable fact in the United States, especially as communicated by television. However, television is surely not the only medium for marketing goods and services, and producers seek to reach consumers through a multitude of other channels, including radio, billboard, telephone, postal mail, electronic mail, and so forth. To penetrate the thicket of competing messages, advertisers have developed increasingly invasive approaches. Ironically, many consumers have come to accept advertising as a value-natural—and in some cases wholly agreeable—feature of contemporary life. In some communication forms, it is virtually impossible to distinguish the actual content from the sales promotions. Nevertheless, a growing number of anti-advertising campaigns has begun to make some novel (and seemingly conservative) assertions, namely that advertising infringes upon personal freedom, contributes to mental and physical harm, and impairs economic growth. The emergence of this discourse has generated some raucous forms of resistance and given birth to a loose alliance of organizations variously dedicated to stricter regulation (and in some cases outright abolition) of advertising.

Although it is unlikely that this confederation of anti-advertising organizations constitutes a social movement in the strict sociological sense, what is more interesting for current purposes is the high degree of issue

[7] See the letter endorsed by the American Medical Association and other allied organizations in support of TV-Turnoff Week, available at http://www.tvturnoff.org/healthgroups%20pr% 2002.htm.

[8] In a related vein, critics denounce television for reducing political awareness because the medium encourages viewers to focus their attention on fictional characters rather than real events. TVFA contends that 59 percent of Americans can name all of the Three Stooges, while only 17 percent can identify three justices on the Supreme Court.

differentiation that exists within this sphere. For instance, advocates have launched initiatives to oppose the commercialization of public education, to resist the use of paid promotions to sell tobacco, to work against the erection and continued use of billboards, and to stop the communication of advertisements by telephone, postal mail, and electronic mail.

Commercial Alert (CA), an advocacy organization founded by Ralph Nader in 1998, is the undisputed leader of the American anti-advertising movement. CA's stated mission is, "to keep the commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting the higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy" (http://www.commercialalert. org). The organization's activities focus on lobbying for legislation to regulate advertising and on preventing the proliferation of commercial content in public venues. For example, CA urged the top fifty advertising agencies in the country to boycott CNN's *Student News* after the program dropped its commitment to be commercial-free. Other initiatives have sought to encourage the prohibition of advertising on public transport vehicles, to persuade publishers from printing sales pitches for junk food in children's books, to pressure major-league baseball teams to remove badges with product insignias from players' uniforms, and to discourage companies from patronizing *Channel One*, the controversial in-school television network (DeVaney, 1994).

A specific point of criticism against advertising that appears to have struck a chord in the American public mind over the past decade concerns the effects of commercial promotion on children. While it was not framed specifically as an anti-advertising campaign, efforts to discourage the tobacco company R. J. Reynolds' from running its so-called Joe Camel advertisements dampened the effectiveness of a marketing tool deliberately aimed at children (DiFranza 1991).

Aside from CA, there is a diverse network of smaller and less visible organizations working along similar lines.[9] Three groups are emblematic of the activity in this sphere. First, Stop Commercial Exploitation of Children (www.commercialexploitation.com) is specifically concerned with the harmful effects of advertising on youngsters. Second, Dads and Daughters (www.dadsanddaughters.org) is an incipient group committed to fostering meaningful relationships between fathers and their female children, an agenda that seeks to dampen the deleterious effects of advertising on young women. Finally, the Center for Commercial-Free Public Education (CCFPE) works to resist the encroachment of advertising in schools. Established in Oakland in 1993 to campaign against *Channel One*, the organization is one of many grassroots groups that have coalesced to oppose the news service.[10] Because CCFPE is larger and more established than most of its counterparts, it supports other local activists with information and training. The group coordinates initiatives to raise student consciousness about advertising in contemporary life, to encourage schools to become commercial-free, and to support parents who challenge the invasion of corporate promotions in schools.[11]

Tobacco companies have been a specific target of anti-advertising campaigners in the United States. The battle over tobacco advertising has been raging for as long as public health advocates have recognized that cigarettes were hazardous. The Badvertising Institute (BI) is one organization that has been at the forefront of the effort to ban the advertising of tobacco products, and it played a major role in the demise of the aforementioned Joe Camel. BI models itself as an educational group, but it also pursues an active advocacy agenda. One of its notable activities is the production of mock renditions of actual tobacco advertisements. BI also prepares educational materials for schools, organizes exhibits, and presents slideshows and workshops to advance the case against tobacco advertising.[12]

Other anti-advertising campaigns have sought to expose the tendency of some companies to make unsubstantiated claims. As consumers have expressed a preference for corporations with reputable social and environmental records, it has become common for advertisers to appropriate these themes for promotional purposes. Perhaps not surprisingly, the firms responsible for many familiar brands have sought to embellish their accomplishments, practices that activists have termed "bluewashing" and "greenwashing." The former refers to a company's tendency to exaggerate its commitment to social responsibility, and the latter denotes unjustified amplification of its environmental performance. One organization that has taken up the challenge of exposing instances of bluewashing and greenwashing is the ethical watchdog CorpWatch.

Anti-advertising activists in the United States have also taken their efforts to the nation's highways. Since

[9] An especially prominent focus for activists seeking to limit advertising to children has been to block the penetration of promotional inducements in schools. In recent years, as school districts have struggled with the rising costs of education, a growing number of them have turned to advertising as a supplemental source of revenue. At many schools, it is customary for corporate marketing messages to appear on book covers, hallways, athletic facilities, and buses. Especially prominent are soda manufacturers that have negotiated exclusive "pouring" contracts to sell their products in vending machines and at school events. Sponsored educational materials are also regularly mailed free of charge to teachers and principles for use in the classroom.

[10] While CCFPE and many of the groups that are part of its alliance promote secular values, evangelical Christian organizations have also targeted *Channel One*. Obligation and the Eagle Forum are two groups that oppose the advertising, as well as the programming, on *Channel One* on religious grounds. These organizations coordinate boycotts of *Channel One*'s parent company and offer parents a "tool kit" for removing the news service from their children's schools. As a mark of its political sophistication, this activist network has reached beyond its traditional base to recruit into their fold many national education associations.

[11] A measure of the high level of concern that exists regarding the effects of advertising on children is that this campaign is not confined to groups of intrepid grassroots activists. For instance, the American Academy of Pediatrics took a stand on the issue in 1995 that called for more vigorous regulation of advertising aimed at children.

[12] Many other anti-smoking groups, such as the American Lung Association and the Coalition for Women Against Smoking, oppose tobacco advertisements, but they do not make it the main focus of their campaigns.

the 1950s, efforts to impose prohibitions on outdoor advertising have been part of wider efforts to encourage highway beautification. Early federal legislation banning the erection of billboards in specific areas took effect in 1965, and several states—notably Vermont, Hawaii, Maine, and Alaska—adopted more exacting measures. Proponents of these laws, including Lady Bird Johnson, the wife of the former president, generally framed their concerns not in antagonistic terms denouncing advertising, but as appeals to an aesthetic sensibility. The organization Scenic America has been at the forefront on this issue since its inception and continues to provide resources to numerous state and local groups, such as Citizens for a Scenic Florida, Citizens for a Scenic Spokane, and Citizens for a Scenic North Nevada, that work to ban outdoor advertising in specific jurisdictions. More recently, these groups have spearheaded campaigns against telecommunications towers and other facilities deemed to disfigure the landscape.

Most encounters with advertising are situational experiences into which consumers insert themselves. Exposure to billboards, television commercials, and magazine inserts arguably occurs when individuals take purposeful action that brings them within reach of these commercial appeals. Consumers who are interested in practicing an especially vigilant form of avoidance behavior can actively avoid (or at least lessen) their encounters with these promotional inducements. For this reason, various forms of unprompted advertising, some of them quite ingenious, have come to be widely despised. Telemarketing calls, junk mail, and so-called unsolicited commercial e-mails (UCM) circumvent conventional defenses and become major sources of irritation. Public intolerance of these unduly intrusive modes of advertising is growing and, according to some observers, is prompting the biggest consumer backlash in decades. This response has assumed many different expressions and led to the formation of a host of organizations.

First, telemarketing involves the use of targeted voice- and fax-based telephone calls. These promotional practices have always had a dark side and over the years have attracted no shortage of unscrupulous operators. Nevertheless, during the past decade, more efficient dialing and messaging technologies have reduced the cost of reaching large numbers of households and the field has grown severalfold. Telemarketing firms are even setting up large-scale operations in India and other English-speaking countries, where they take advantage of low international calling rates to the United States to canvass on behalf of American companies. To defend themselves, would-be recipients of telemarketing solicitations can purchase and install an impressive number of gadgets that offer the promise of deterring telephone solicitors. Most of the numerous organizations working to thwart telemarketing adopt a similar approach that consists of offering consumers information on how to insulate themselves and enforce their legal rights. The groups also issue blanket advice discouraging the purchase of goods and services from telemarketers.

Anti-telemarketing organizations are also typically equipped to offer information regarding the Telephone Consumer Protection Act of 1991 (TCPA). TCPA prohibits unsolicited faxes and pre-recorded telephone sales calls, as well as providing states with the authority to create "do-not-call" lists.[13] Once an individual places herself on such a list, it becomes illegal to direct most telemarketing calls to her. Virtually all the anti-telemarketing groups support TCPA, but advocate for more restrictive legislation to impede the heavy flow of activity that continues to occur.

Second, unsolicited mailings, or junk mail, are a ubiquitous feature of life in the United States. Public tolerance for the seemingly relentless flow of postal promotions is higher than it is for telemarketing, perhaps because it is easier to discard an unopened envelope than it is to hang up on a polite telephone caller. While there are a few organizations that address this problem, none does so as vigorously as the Center for a New American Dream (CNAD), a new, somewhat anomalous upstart group. CNAD has created an entire campaign around the issue of eliminating junk mail. This organization does not view these mailings in terms of customary anti-advertising themes, but as a particularly egregious and offensive form of environmental disregard.

Finally, so-called unsolicited commercial e-mail, more commonly known as "spam," has become a common feature of mass computer use in recent years. Spam is not only a nuisance to most recipients, but it creates congestion on the Internet and overtaxes computing resources. The only thing that has grown faster than the volume of spam is the public reaction against it. While computer experts endorse the use of specially designed anti-spam software, it appears that the purveyors of these solicitations are able to stay a step ahead on the technological curve. In the absence of a credible technological fix, anti-spam activists have launched numerous organizations and websites to stem the rising tide of these electronic promotions. One group, the Coalition Against Unsolicited Commercial E-mail (CAUCE), is an example of organized resistance to spam. Aside from maintaining a website to which spam victims can turn for guidance, CAUCE lobbies for stringent legislation barring the distribution of unsolicited e-mail.

Lifestyle Reinventions and Sustainable Consumption

Vocal protest represents only one facet of the contemporary effort to forge a new politics of consumption in the United States. While culture jammers, anti-consumerism activists, and anti-advertising campaigners have formulated strident modes with which to express their anxieties about contemporary consumption-laden lifestyles, other sympathizers have chosen a more inward-looking approach focused on transforming personal values and practices. Termed lifestyle reinventions, this branch of the nascent sustainable consumption movement comprises voluntary simplifiers, ethical consumers, and slow food aficionados.

[13] There now exists a federal do-not-call list designed to limit intrusive telemarketing appeals (Richtel, 2003).

Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary simplicity has been a preoccupation of both ancient prophets and modern social critics (Shi, 1985). Although contemporary adherents are likely to be familiar with popular proponents, such as Henry David Thoreau and Mahatmas Gandhi, it is Duane Elgin's (1981) book that serves today as the inspirational bible. It is therefore appropriate to turn to this treatise for an operational definition.

> To live more voluntarily is to live more deliberately, intentionally, and purposefully—in short, it is to live more consciously. We cannot be deliberate when we are distracted from life. We cannot be intentional when we are not paying attention. We cannot be purposeful when we are not being present. Therefore, to act in a voluntary manner is to be aware of ourselves as we move through life. This requires that we not only pay attention to the actions we take in the outer world, but also that we pay attention to ourselves acting—our inner world. To the extent that we do not notice both inner and outer aspects of our passage through life, then our capacity for voluntary, deliberate, and purposeful action is commensurably diminished.

In other words, the decision to adopt a life of voluntary simplicity is a personal matter. Everyone is capable of determining where life is fraught with unnecessary complication. All have the capacity to recognize the clutter and pretense that weigh upon them and make the passage through this world more cumbersome and awkward. To live more simply is to become unburdened—to live more lightly, cleanly, and aerodynamically. It is to establish a more direct, humble, and unencumbered relationship with all aspects of life: the things that are consumed, the work that is done, the relationships that are maintained, and the connections that are created with nature and the cosmos. Simplicity of living means meeting life face-to-face. Voluntary simplicity, by extension, is about confronting life without unnecessary disruption and turmoil. It is about taking life as it is—straight and unadulterated.

Voluntary simplicity is not a lifestyle of deprivation, and this is often a critical point of misinterpretation by individuals who are unfamiliar with its aims. It is about discovering what is sufficient in life—based upon thoughtful analysis of one's values. Apropos for Elgin is Simone de Beauvoir's contention, "If all life does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying." If people look to non-material satisfactions, thus simplifying their lives, then they can establish a more meaningful existence and truly experience life. Voluntary simplicity is, then, about forging modest material needs to allow opportunities for people to surpass themselves and to find more satisfying, meaningful existences.

Early research on the extent to which people were actively pursuing voluntary simplicity in the United States suggested this mode of living had considerable appeal across a range of geographic regions (see, for example, Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Leonard-Barton, 1981). There were indications that voluntary simplicity was distinct from other forms of lifestyle politics, popular during the 1970s, that stressed agrarian values and self-sufficiency. These studies also pointed to the fact that the vast majority of voluntary simplifiers were well educated and had grown up under relatively affluent circumstances. In keeping with Ronald Inglehart's (1990) notion of post-materialism, they had conditioned cravings for material goods.

More recently Amitai Etzioni (1998) has conceptualized three forms of voluntary simplicity—downshifters, strong simplifiers, and holistic simplifiers. First, downshifters, according to this typology, are the most moderate, least intense simplifiers. These individuals tend to be financially secure, but for one reason or another choose to forego certain consumer items. Etzioni describes this group as being comprised of people who "dress down" to work, or drive unfashionable cars. There is no doubt a certain renegade status associated with this lifestyle, and the irony is that while it may appear superficially simple, it is actually costly and engenders its own sort of commodification

Second, strong simplifiers are people who have actively rejected high paying jobs and lavish living in favor of less remunerative compensation and much more modest lifestyles. A widely read and cited *New York Times* report from the mid-1990s described this group as comprised of individuals who choose to buy and earn less, in exchange for more free time and less stress. This form of lifestyle politics involves a "quiet personal revolt against the dominant culture of getting and spending" (Goldberg, 1995).

Finally, Etzioni distinguishes a separate group of strong simplifiers that is comprised of individuals who embrace an ardent conception of "simple living," one that entails active abandonment of affluent lifestyles. However, this class of voluntary simplicity lacks the back-to-the-land ethos of the earlier era. With the explicit goal of leading simpler, less cosmopolitan lifestyles, strong simplifiers reside in various geographic locales, including older suburbs, gentrifying urban neighborhoods, smaller rural towns, and farmsteads. According to Etzioni, this group has a coherently articulated philosophy grounded in transcendentalism and is explicitly anti-consumerist.

Several recent studies have sought to expound upon Etzioni's analytic framework and to shed further light on the motivations behind a purported shift toward voluntary simplicity. A particularly notable investigation, by Margaret Craig-Lees and Constance Hill (2002), suggests that efforts to conceptualize voluntary simplicity solely in terms of behaviors deemed antagonistic to material possessions might be overly narrow. These authors contend that, although all three of the themes associated with materialists concern physical possessions, only one of the themes characterizing simplifiers has to do with material goods. Voluntary simplifiers may reduce their material consumption, but a life of poverty is not required and it is not necessary to sever all emotional ties to goods.

Craig-Lees and Hill take issue with how we conventionally understand materialism. We typically think of materialists as people who derive their happiness and satisfaction from physical possessions. However, this study questions whether it is indeed the case that materialists use possessions to create significance, while non-materialists generate significance out of experiences. Craig-Lees and Hill found that voluntary simplifiers demonstrated greater attachment to their homes than non-voluntary simplifiers did. In a finding that departs from the conventional view, non-voluntary simplifiers were found to be more likely to view their homes in non-emotive terms as smart investments and good buys. In this sense, the voluntary simplifiers, because of the seemingly deep connection they developed with their possessions, appeared more materialistic than their non-simplifying counterparts.

In a more recent essay, Elgin (2003) contributes to this discussion on how to typologize voluntary simplicity, and generates a still more variegated schema that distinguishes among choiceful simplicity, commercial simplicity, compassionate simplicity, ecological simplicity, elegant simplicity, frugal simplicity, natural simplicity, political simplicity, soulful simplicity, and uncluttered simplicity, by no means meant to be mutually exclusive. Elgin emphasizes the artful tapestry in which individuals blend and combine elements of each expression of simple living. Attached to each of these ten modes of voluntary simplicity is a specific description, but for current purposes they can be aggregated into three main expressions: ecological awareness, frugal consumption, and personal growth.

First, voluntary simplicity, at least in its contemporary form, has strong intellectual roots in the environmental movement. In fact, Elgin issued his landmark book soon after publication of the infamous *Limits to Growth*, prepared under the aegis of the Club of Rome. However, the patchy evidence that does exist on the motivations behind the adoption of voluntary simplicity suggests that the connection between ecological awareness and voluntary simplicity is actually quite weak (see, for example, Maniates, 2002). For instance, in Craig-Lees and Hill's sample, only ten percent of self-designated voluntary simplifiers were members of environmental organizations, and only 25 percent identified the environment as a primary reason for their lifestyle choice.

Second, some voluntary simplifiers are motivated by a personal commitment to frugality (Dacyczyn, 1998). This form of simple living seeks to resurrect the skills of thriftiness and to give them a new, more artful connotation. Mass consumerism and the quest for continual economic growth has denigrated the knowledge required to live without much regard for the value of money. Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin's bestselling book *Your Money or Your Life* has been a particularly popular approach for reinvigorating enthusiasm for frugality. This volume provides readers with a nine-step program for achieving financial independence and establishing a sound relationship with money.

Finally, voluntary simplicity appears to be attracting attention because of a subtler and intangible promise for personal growth. In this sense, adherents seek to take on board certain lifestyle practices because they seem "right" and are suffused with greater authenticity. This quest for self-improvement also contains an element of spiritual enlightenment.

These three facets of voluntary simplicity have, over the past decade, generated a vast array of mass-market magazines, narrow-niche publications, product catalogues, websites, and other resources—a veritable industry of its own. These circumstances suggest that it is reasonable to raise the question whether this mode of sustainable consumption has, in the United States, passed the threshold of a social movement.[14] The very nature of voluntary simplicity makes it difficult to formulate a concise answer, mainly because there is a contradiction between the downscaling of lifestyles and the formation of a large-scale social movement with specific political intent (Maniates, 2002). Voluntary simplifiers embrace specific lifestyle choices, but the emphasis is on introspection and personal change rather than on creating a more ambitious political program. Another notable feature of voluntary simplicity in its current forms is the absence of vilification. In other words, social movements normally manifest a need to draw boundaries around their campaigns, and simplifiers are not seeking, at least presently, to articulate a social critique that assigns responsibility for the purported problems of consumerism.

Ethical Consumption

Adherents of ethical consumption maintain that consumers, by exercising care when making ordinary purchases, can recast the current system of social and political relations. More specifically, by steering clear of products manufactured under conditions that exploit vulnerable laborers or unduly degrade the environment, material consumption can become an engine for human and ecological betterment. The United Nations Platform for Action Committee (UNPAC) has developed a comprehensive guide to ethical consumption that includes recommendations to support local businesses, to assess the environmental costs of consumer purchases, to purchase second-hand goods, and to consider the transportation of products.

Although ethical consumption tends to enjoy greater public visibility in Europe, the Council on Economic Priorities (CEP) has spearheaded the movement in the United States (CEP, 1994). The CEP is a public interest research group funded by memberships, philanthropic grants, and donations. The organization edits a keystone publication in the field of ethical consumption, entitled *Shopping for a Better World*, and encourages

[14] Consistent with the approach taken by this analysis is the tendency among self-described voluntary simplifiers to reject the contention that they are carriers of a broader political agenda. Adherents of simpler lifestyles are likely to equate social movements with superficial changes in "style of life" (as opposed to more penetrating changes in "way of life"). The extended comments of one of Elgin's respondents are illuminating:
"This is a country of media hype, and [simple living] is good copy. The media is likely to pick up on it…and create a movement. I hope they won't. The changes we're talking about are fundamental and take a lot of time…If it is made into a movement, it could burn itself out. I hope it spreads slowly. This way the changes will be more pervasive. Voluntary Simplicity is the kind of thing that people need to discover for themselves."

consumers to use their purchasing power as a vote—in other words as a way of conveying their preferences to otherwise inaccessible corporations. The group advocates that

> Your choice of what car, washing machine, computer, or even breakfast cereal to buy may make more difference than you think, especially if you let companies know that social and environmental records affect your choices. Companies wield tremendous power, but individuals can influence corporate practices and can actually help change the world. It's the simple, positive activism of casting your *economic vote* conscientiously" (CEP, 1994).

CEP's consumer guide rates several hundred companies on the basis of environment performance, charitable donations, community outreach programs, women's and minority advancement, support for family oriented employment policies, workplace issues, and information disclosure policies. The CEP Honor Roll recognizes firms that score especially well on these criteria, while the so-called X-rated list is reserved for the poorest performers. Consumers can use these assessments to guide their purchase decisions on virtually any product.

Social Accountability International (SIA), an affiliate of CEP, serves as the accreditation agency for these evaluations. Launched during the early 1990s in response to the weak and incompatible guidelines that individual firms were developing, SAI's mission is to create standards for workplace codes of conduct and labor conditions worldwide. The group's first standard was Social Accountability 8000 (SA 8000), which provides a uniform measure for assessing workplace conditions and for independently gauging the compliance of specific industrial facilities. SA 8000 seeks to define objectively the relative quality of the workplace, and then to translate this information to consumers so that they can respond accordingly.

Co-op America, an NGO established in 1982 with a current membership of 50,000 individuals and 2,000 businesses, seeks to educate and empower people and organizations to use the economic system to promote positive change. Within the constellation of American advocacy organizations, Co-op America is unique in that it does not campaign for equity and justice using conventional political or legal strategies; rather staff members strive to reorient economic relationships by promoting more conscientious consumer expenditures. The approach consists of two interlocking elements: Co-Op America, on one hand, helps consumers identify companies that are committed to socially and environmentally acceptable practices and, on the other hand, assists companies to operate under these stricter standards. The organization coordinates several initiatives, including a green business program, a consumer education program, a corporate responsibility program, and a sustainable living program.

Global Exchange is a California-based human rights organization committed to environmental, political, and social justice. The group's campaigns promote democratic ideals and political empowerment both in the United States and abroad, and seek to highlight the connections between corrupt political systems and human rights abuses. In recent years, countries in which Global Exchange has been active include Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico. Though its operational strategies vary across countries, the organization does not aim simply to press employers to pay better wages. Rather, Global Exchange seeks to improve human rights by educating people about oppressive political and social organizations.

Closely connected to the campaign for ethical consumption is the effort to support so-called fair trade as an alternative means of exchange (Rice, 2001; Browne et al., (2000). This strategy seeks to sidestep complex issues embedded in the political economy of globalization by directly linking ethical consumers with socially and environmentally conscientious growers and manufactures. The intent is to simplify distribution to ensure that a larger portion of the sales price accrues to indigenous farmers and small-scale producers. By selling fair trade products at premium prices, sponsors offset higher transaction costs. TransFair USA, the leading fair trade organization in the country, works closely with the Fair Trade Federation (FTF). FTF a network of retailers, wholesalers, and producers that have agreed to comply with a code of conduct calling for schemes that offer employees opportunities for advancement, provide equal employment opportunities, and engage in environmentally sustainable practices.

For the past decade, coffee has had an especially prominent position on the fair trade agenda. Coffee is the second largest commodity import in the United States (after oil) and Americans annually consume 20 percent of the world's total production. At the same time, the tendency for coffee plantations to promote unsafe and unhealthy working conditions has been a long-standing point of discussion (Tucker, 2000). To ameliorate some of the problems associated with coffee production, fair trade proponents have sought to educate consumers about the benefits of purchasing their beans from cooperatives, of avoiding higher yield varieties that require greater sun intensity (to discourage deforestation and biodiversity loss), and of supporting growers that pay workers equitable wages.

Increasingly, consumers are demanding fair trade coffee, and major purveyors such as Starbucks have been encountering pressure from their customers to offer a fair trade alternative. At present, fair trade coffee comprises only one percent of the global market, with the majority of sales taking place through specialized fair trade retailers—many of them operating via the Internet. However, after considerable pressure from stakeholders, food industry giants such as Kraft and Proctor and Gamble have recently announced plans to launch fair trade coffee brands.

A related area of activism has sought to highlight the migration of garment manufacturing to low-wage havens in the developing world. Laborers working under substandard conditions throughout Asia and Latin America sew most of the clothing worn today by relatively affluent people in economically advanced countries. Developing

countries often find themselves in the unfortunate position of bidding against one another to convince large corporations and their subcontractors to set up these facilities (Ross, 1997; see also Gonzalez, 2003).

In 1997, municipal officials in North Olmstead (Ohio) realized that nearly all of the garments their city purchased—from athletic equipment to police uniforms—came from overseas sweatshops. This recognition encouraged the city to pass the first law in the United States banning a government from purchasing products manufactured under sweatshop conditions. This initiative led to the notion of "sweat-free cities" and induced a number of major municipalities (including San Francisco, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and New York) to pass similar legislation.

The movement to protest the globalization of clothing manufacturing has moved from the chambers of municipal governments to college and university campuses. Indeed, the opposition to sweatshop labor has spurred one of the largest and most vocal forms of student activism in recent years. Directed by the group United Students Against Sweatshops, this wave of protest politics started when students began to examine their institutions' ties to companies such as Nike and Reebok. The organization currently campaigns against "campus sweat" and has assembled a network of over 200 colleges and universities.

Action on many campuses has involved the elimination of sweatshop clothing adorned with the insignias of some of the most esteemed colleges and universities in the United States. To counter these protests, the Collegiate Licensing Company, a consortium of major educational institutions that negotiates with the distributors of these products, published a code of conduct and encouraged participating firms to endorse it. Because student activists viewed this assurance as insufficient—it did not contain a clause requiring full public disclosure, a provision demanding a living wage, or a statement concerning women's rights—this defensive action only intensified campus demonstrations.

The effort to resist the importation of apparel manufactured under substandard conditions has also given rise to a more general campaign. Leading this struggle has been the group Sweatshop Watch, an eclectic coalition of trade unions, civil rights groups, and immigrant rights organizations committed to eliminating sweatshop production. Sweatshop Watch focuses on both the domestic (especially California) and international dimensions of this form of exploitation.

The Slow Food Movement

Originally launched in 1989 by Carlo Petrini in response to the establishment of the first McDonald's restaurant in Rome, the slow food movement has assumed international significance and now maintains offices in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and the United States (Kummer, 2002; Petrini, 2001). The major aims of the movement are to celebrate the joy of wholesome and nutritious food and to protect the gastronomic traditions of the world's cultures in the face of the interlocking forces of modernization, standardization, and globalization. International membership in the slow food movement's 600 chapters, or *convivia,* has reached 70,000 food aficionados in 45 countries.

Slow food adherents argue for the importance of preserving the pleasures and qualities of everyday life from the relentless pursuit of speed and purported convenience by slowing down, and by celebrating traditional lifestyles. Though the movement does adopt some of the rhetoric of anti-globalization activists, particularly in terms of the threats posed by industrially produced food, the slow food movement does not embrace the rancorous political edge common among supporters of the wider campaign (Miele and Murdoch, 2002; Jones et al., 2003). In addition to apprehension about globalization, foodies (in slow food parlance) express concern over what they interpret to be a ceaseless barrage of food regulations from national and multinational authorities. Instituted to promote food safety, many of these provisions have jeopardized the traditional food preparation methods favored by specialty businesses and local food artisans.[15] The slow food movement has not been passive in the face of these regulatory directives, and the European wing of the international organization recently opened an office in Brussels to lobby against these measures. The effectiveness of slow food adherents has proved formidable, and foodies delivered a petition to the European Commission with half-a-million signatures demanding exemptions to many of the hygiene rules. In response to these efforts, Italy received special dispensations for thousands of its small food producers (Stille, 2001).

In addition to its commitment to the preservation of local culture, slow food also embraces a certain environmental sensibility. Adherents support "sustainability and biodiversity of the earth's bounty," as well as the consumption of seasonal and local foods (Nabhan, 2002). This particular brand of ecological consciousness shares many similarities with the sentiments expressed by hunting and birding enthusiasts. Just as wildlife proponents are motivated to protect valued habitats, the slow food's ecological commitments are tied to the production of healthy and wholesome food. [16]

While much of the slow food movement's organizational resources remain in Europe, it has had some notable success developing a base in the United States. At present, more than 7,000 members subscribe to 70 American *convivia* and produce a national publication aptly named *The Snail*. The guiding values of Slow Food USA are sustainability, cultural diversity, pleasure and quality in everyday life, inclusiveness, and authenticity and integrity. One of the major programs sponsored by the American arm of the movement is "Ark USA" (part of the worldwide "Ark of Taste"). Ark USA seeks to identify, protect, and promote indigenous foods deemed to be in

[15] For example, the European Union's food and sanitary regulations stipulate that the traditional curing of Tuscan pig lard be done in stainless steel containers, instead of marble vats. Advocates of the traditional process argue that the marble vats are essential to creating the right flavor and texture for the lard. Another rule prohibits baking pizzas in traditional wood-burning ovens that contain carcinogenic ash (Smith, 2000).

[16] One commentator has called Slow Food the "gastronomic version of Greenpeace: a defiant determination to preserve unprocessed, time-intensive food from being wiped off the culinary map" (Osborne, 2001).

danger of "extinction." Slow Food USA has established a committee that maintains a data bank to collect information on cultivars, breeds, products, and producers, as well as restaurants and shops that sell Ark products. In the eyes of some observers, this project provides the slow food movement with a greater semblance of legitimacy than it would otherwise have if it were simply dedicated to the pleasures of indulging in traditional foods.[17]

The worldwide success of slow food, and its call for simpler lifestyles, has inspired more ambitious activities in recent years and led to the establishment of a new organizational infrastructure. Towns and cities around the world are pledging to promote urban planning agendas geared toward improving the quality of life by reducing the frenetic pace of social activity. Launched in Italy in 2000, "Slow Cities" is an international organization that seeks to build upon the successes of the slow food movement. If the intent of slow food is to preserve the integrity and traditions of deliberate culinary pleasures, then the slow cities offshoot is its geographic equivalent.

Designation as a slow city entails permitting more neighborhood restaurants, combating traffic and noise pollution, facilitating bicycling, planting trees, and maintaining parks and urban squares. These requirements translate into more practical measures: banning car alarms, television antennas, and neon signs. Slow cities are also encouraged to enlarge pedestrian areas and to move automobile parking lots to the edges of city centers. While these initiatives are only likely to be practicable for smaller cities, this does not mean that larger municipalities are discouraged from pursuing slow city status. To date, only four Italian cities (Orvieto, Greve, Bra, and Positano) have secured formal recognition as slow cities and a further forty jurisdictions in Italy are being considered for certification.[18] There are no American municipalities presently up for nomination to become slow cities, though given the similar commitments of slow cities and new urbanism it is likely only a matter of time before a worthy candidate steps forward.

Public Policy and Sustainable Consumption

As noted earlier, sustainable development has not been a central issue for governmental planning in the United States, and the adverse impacts of consumption have been even further removed from mainstream public policy agendas. Despite his loose endorsement of sustainability, President Clinton did little to advance the issue, and the current Bush administration has pursued an avowedly anti-environmental political program. Nonetheless, if one adopts a broad-minded view of sustainable consumption, there are indeed a number of officially sanctioned initiatives taking place in the United States that are fully consistent with the aims of this policy program.

Local Greenhouse Gas Reduction Schemes

While anthropogenic climate change has become, over the past two decades, a central international environmental policy issue, the American federal government continues to postpone substantive actions to reduce the country's greenhouse gas emissions. The lack of national action in this area has left a void that a handful of environmentally progressive states are now stepping forward to fill. Several states have created their own greenhouse gas reduction schemes and, among the northeastern states, a promising effort is afoot to create a regional market for trading emission credits (Johnson, 2003a).[19] The following section reviews the individual climate change policies of three of these states—New Jersey, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts.[20]

First, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) issued in 1998 an administrative order calling for a statewide greenhouse gas reduction of 3.5 percent by 2005.[21] To support this objective, two years later NJDEP released the New Jersey Sustainability Green House Gas (GHG) Action Plan that advances strategies to achieve reductions in several specific areas, including energy conservation, transportation, innovative technologies, pollution prevention, waste management and recycling, and open space and natural resources protection. To measure progress, the plan establishes indicators predicated upon the total volume of GHG emissions (based on data developed by the Energy Information Agency), commuting by public transport, and annual mean surface air temperature.

Second, New Hampshire governor Jeanne Shaheen signed the Clean Power Act (CPA) into law in 2002. This legislation represented a milestone for state-level climate change policymaking, as it was the first instance in which a state required power plants to implement a four-pollutant emission reduction program. The CPA calls upon electric utilities operating in New Hampshire to cut their releases of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, mercury, and carbon dioxide by implementing new pollution control technologies or by participating in emission trading schemes. Because of the state's susceptibility to transboundary air pollution from other states, the CPA makes it more expensive for electric

[17] The number of endangered foods listed in the Ark of Taste program numbers ninety worldwide, with nine of them indigenous to the United States: Dry Monterey Jack Cheese, Green Mountain Potatoes, Blenheim Apricots, Creole Cream Cheese, Heritage Turkeys, New Mexican Native Chiles, Delaware Bay Oysters, Heritage Clone Zinfandel, and naturally grown wild rice.

[18] Full accreditation is currently pending for forty cities, including Canale, Loreto, Penne, Todi, and Trevi (Kennedy, 2001).

[19] The Conference of New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers in 2000 also adopted a coordinated climate change plan that includes regional targets, state and provincial commitments to implement their own greenhouse gas reduction schemes, and statements of intent to develop specially tailored educational outreach programs.

[20] In addition to the northeastern states, California has also been a leader in the development of a state-level greenhouse gas reduction program.

[21] The target is calculated in CO_2 equivalent units and requires the state to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 20 million CO_2 equivalent tons (NJDEP, 1999). Current projections indicate that the state will likely not achieve its reduction target, largely because of increases in emissions from transport vehicles.

utilities to purchase emission credits from facilities outside of the region.[22]

Finally, Massachusetts, through implementation of its voluntary environmental stewardship program, represents a different state-based approach to sustainability and greenhouse gas reduction. This program requires participating businesses to commit to improve, over a three-year period, at least four aspects of their environmental performance. Intended, for companies that already have environmental management systems in place and are in full compliance with all environmental regulations, this initiative seeks to secure improvements in energy conservation, water use, toxics, air emissions, discharges to water, solid and hazardous waste management, and product performance.

On a complementary front, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) assists municipal and county governments in the United States and elsewhere in organizing their own proactive anti-climate change policies. ICLEI, a new institutional entity that operates under United Nations auspices, serves, in its own words, as the "international environmental agency for local governments" (International Council). Through the provision of policy guidance, training, and technical assistance, the organization presently serves more than 350 sub-national governmental units that are committed to building a global movement of localities committed to sustainable development.

ICLEI has developed its Cities for Climate Protection Campaign (CCP) to support local governments in formulating and implementing policies to achieve measurable local greenhouse gas reductions, to improve air quality, and to enhance urban livability and sustainability. Two cities in the United States that exemplify the ICLEI's mission are Burlington, Vermont and Austin, Texas.

Both residents and visitors frequently characterize Burlington as a politically liberal community with a palpable new-age ethos, though this description captures only a portion of what invariably is a much more complex political economy. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the municipal government championed environmental and social projects that established a nascent culture of sustainability.[23] In partnership with ICLEI, Burlington has begun to formulate an alternative community model, one rooted in the ideals of sustainability and good urban governance. Much of the city's sustainability planning has occurred within the context of its so-called Legacy Project, a multi-stakeholder initiative that aims to embrace residents from all communities and economic sectors and to initiate a dialogue for giving direction to local development over the next thirty years. The program calls upon people to articulate this vision of the future in accordance with five major themes: economy, neighborhoods, governance, youth and life skills, and environment. The challenge for municipal leaders has been to reconcile Burlington's seemingly inevitable growth with its commitment to sustainability. The city's pioneering experience with sustainability planning has brought forth two especially notable outcomes. The Burlington Eco-Info Project provides residents with easy access to data on local air, water, land, and energy trends, and the Education for Sustainability Program trains schoolteachers to incorporate sustainability issues into their curricula.

Many observers admire Austin, the capital of Texas and home to the state university's main campus, for its relatively progressive municipal politics.[24] The city's CCP campaign seeks to shift five percent of local electricity production to renewable sources. To meet this objective, Austin's municipally owned utility has implemented a variable pricing scheme to induce residents to favor non-polluting forms of electricity. In this manner, Austin expects renewable energy to account for approximately one half of its expected increase in electricity demand. By generating 340 million kw/year from renewable sources—primarily wind—this Texas city will reduce its annual carbon dioxide emissions by approximately 255,000 tons.

Relocalization Schemes

In the United States over the past decade, there has been an outpouring of public policy initiatives to bolster local economic autonomy. Campaigns to encourage consumers to buy indigenously produced goods, to support community-based agriculture, and to legitimize local currency programs have proliferated.[25] This wave of relocalization is, to a large extent, a defensive reaction to the forces of globalization that are disembedding economic activities from their situated contexts. Efforts to promote relocalization can be quite diverse, but they all share the objective of enhancing the sustainability of community enterprises and rekindling direct relationships between producers and consumers. This section reviews three broad categories of this phenomenon: local promotion schemes, novel modes of agricultural production and consumption, and local currency programs.

First, the mantra to "buy American," especially during periods of nationalist fervor or economic retrenchment, is familiar to consumers across the United States. Over the past two decades, states and cities have refashioned this strategy to promote the relocalization of economic activity by encouraging consumers to favor locally produced goods and services. Examples of these so-called "buy local" campaigns can be found in virtually all parts of the country and take a variety of different forms. For instance, the Savannah, Georgia Chamber of Commerce organizes a drive to support local businesses through public education and the distribution of "buy

[22] The CPA calls for annual emission reductions of 75 percent for sulfur dioxide and 70 percent for nitrogen oxides by the end of 2006 and a reduction of carbon dioxide to 1990 levels by 2010.

[23] See the website at http://www3.iclei.org/localstrategies/summary/burlington2.html.

[24] See the website at http://www3.iclei.org/iclei/casedetail.cfm?pid=40.

[25] During the aftermath of the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, these appeals have assumed a certain nationalistic significance. Promotional inducements now regularly beseech consumers to purchase domestic (and indeed local) goods and services as a patriotic gesture (Shenon, 2001; Rather, 2001). A similar phenomenon occurred immediately following the capture of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (Morgan, 2003).

local" emblems.[26] A business promotion group in western North Carolina utilizes a logo to promote local commerce with the slogan, "Buy Local–Western North Carolina is Worth It."[27] An organization in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania encourages consumers to purchase compact discs from local musicians.[28]

Agricultural commodities—especially fruits and vegetables—have been especially popular targets for policy initiatives to relocalize consumption. The sophistication of buy local schemes has improved markedly over the years, and appeals to geographic familiarity today are likely to rely on integrated promotional strategies developed by professional marketing specialists.[29] While all states use this approach to varying degrees, New Jersey, New York, California, and Massachusetts have demonstrated the most consistent commitment.

First, New Jersey claims to be the first state in the country to launch a local campaign to promote its homegrown agricultural products. State agricultural officials began marketing local produce under the slogan "Jersey Fresh" in 1983. The campaign has utilized radio, television, and billboards, as well as colorful signage in supermarkets, to encourage consumers to purchase local agriculture. The state's department of agriculture also provides grants to marketing associations that would like to sell their products in more distant locales. For instance, organizations designed to promote specific crops use the Jersey Fresh moniker to advertise to consumers in Virginia and Montreal.[30] In this way, the campaign has evolved into a regional marketing tool to increase state exports, undermining claims that this program is ultimately about fostering local sustainability.

Second, New York has devised a similar approach to market its agricultural products. The state's department of agriculture uses the slogan "Pride of New York" to persuade consumers to buy locally grown produce. The New York campaign relies largely on conventional advertising and in-store displays to showcase the state's agricultural products. In addition to this statewide program, New York's distinct regions have initiated their own promotional efforts to relocalize consumption at an even more proximate level of geographic scale (Hilchey, 2000; see also Moskin, 2004).

Third, agriculture officials in California have developed a coordinated program for marketing the state's prodigious output of fruits and vegetables to local consumers. This promotional effort is part of the state's familiar and long-standing export-oriented campaigns to encourage the consumption of locally grown raisins and peaches. More recent initiatives to relocalize consumption at the sub-state level in Placer and Sonoma Counties are typical of programs launched elsewhere in California. Placer County utilizes the conventional portfolio of marketing strategies, including print and radio advertising, public education, and supermarket displays, to enhance public awareness of local agriculture. Sonoma County, in part because of its reliance on wine production, has begun to formulate appeals that stress not only that local products are "Sonoma Grown," but that they are "Sonoma Made" as well.[31]

Finally, Massachusetts appears to have the most sophisticated campaign to promote the relocalization of agricultural production and consumption. The state's success is largely attributable to the creation of an array of public-private partnerships, and to savvy marketing. Agriculture officials in Massachusetts have set up a separate division, called "Massgrown," that provides financial and logistical resources to support state agricultural products, and that licenses its slogan: "MASS grown…and fresher!" The state also actively supports farmers' markets, "agritourism," and pick-your-own farms.[32] Despite its relatively small size, Massachusetts has also promoted the development of several sub-state level promotional initiatives. Especially notable is Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA), an organization dedicated to encouraging the consumption of agricultural produce from the western part of the state. CISA actively draws attention to how the programs it facilitates can offset the damaging affects of globalization, and its campaign slogan, "Be a Local Hero–Buy Locally Grown," has attracted national attention.

While the proliferation of buy local campaigns has been widespread, policymakers in the United States have actually been employing a much broader portfolio of strategies to promote the relocalization of food production and consumption. Three notable innovations include community-supported agriculture (CSA), direct marketing of agricultural produce, and community gardening.

CSAs are a latent outgrowth of profound demographic shifts in the United States. The process of rural-urban migration that has reshaped the national landscape over more than 100 years was accompanied (and in many instances motivated by) sweeping technological advances in agricultural efficiency and automated product processing (Hinrichs, 2000). As the size of farmholdings increased and people were displaced from local agricultural economies, they sought new opportunities in the expanding cities. At present, less than two percent of the American population is directly engaged in farming. The disappearance of the American family farm has become a popular focal point for critiques highlighting the dark side of capitalism and globalization.

It is from this nexus that CSAs have grown, and there are today an estimated 1,000 of these agricultural

[26] See the website http://www.buylocalsavannah.com.

[27] See the website http://www.mtnmicro.org/pages/about_us/subsidiaries.html.

[28] See the website http://www.mtnmicro.org/pages/about_us/subsidiaries.html.

[29] A cursory review of these initiatives suggests that geographically defined regions within particular states have developed more proficient programs for promoting their agricultural products.

[30] See the website http://www.state.nj.us/agriculture/markets/jerseyfresh.htm.

[31] See the websites http:// http://www.sonoma-county.org/agcomm/pdf/2001_Crop_Report.pdf and http://www.placergrown.com.

[32] See the website http://www.state.ma.us/dfa/massgrown/index.htm.

enterprises operating across the country.[33] A CSA consists of a community of consumers, who enter into a seasonal "subscription" agreement with a local farm. In return for a preseason payment (normally a few hundred dollars), the farm owner supplies his subscribers with fresh agricultural products on a weekly basis. Farmers and subscribers satisfy one another's respective needs. On one hand, farmers obtain access to a flexible form of financing and a direct distribution channel for their produce. On the other hand, subscribers receive a personal connection to the food they are consuming and the knowledge that it comes from a local source. The relationship is also founded on the fact that most CSAs are committed to sustainable farming practices, and that subscribers often contribute their own labor during the growing season. Hence, a system has evolved in which both farmers and subscribers can insulate themselves from industrialized modes of agriculture and get a foothold for relocalizing themselves against the forces of mass consumerism and globalization.[34]

Another form of alternative production and consumption of agricultural produce is the concept of "direct marketing," which entails the distribution of fruits and vegetables without reliance on corporate mechanisms. While CSAs fall within this rubric, another common example is the growing popularity of farmers' markets (Grey, 2000). Farmers' markets are as old as agriculture itself, but their numbers began to wane in the United States following World War II with the advent of the modern supermarket. By 1960, there were fewer than 100 farmers' markets nationwide. During the past two decades, there has been renewed interest in this mode of engaging producers and consumers and today there are an estimated 2400 farmers' markets operating around the country. The resurgence of this mode of direct marketing is in part attributable to a backlash against mainstream agriculture. The success of farmers' markets resides in their ability to exploit the anonymity of the industrial food system with its tendency to produce goods that must conform to standardized guidelines regarding size, color, taste, and so forth.

A final, if understated, example of the innovative production and consumption of agricultural produce is provided by community gardening (see, for example, von Hassell, 2002). There are more than 10,000 community gardens in the United States, many of them located in the country's most economically depressed neighborhoods. The transitory and uncertain disposition of the land parcels used to operate community gardening schemes often means that it is difficult for devotees to gain secure title to their plots. However, policymakers in some cities—New York City has one of the largest and most successful community garden programs in the country—have devised strategies to ensure long-term tenancy.

Proponents of community gardening often frame the practice as an opportunity for low-income urban residents to reconnect to the local environment and to gain a degree of political empowerment—while at the same time growing their own wholesome food. Viewed from a slightly different perspective, it becomes apparent that community gardening is also an instance of the relocalization of agriculture and the promotion of sustainable consumption.

While local promotion schemes and innovations in agriculture both clearly demonstrate a trend in the United States toward new consumption practices, the most conscious and dedicated efforts to create systems of proximate exchange are local currency initiatives. Long before national governments began issuing their own legal tender, and before monetary policy became a central function of centralized authorities, local currency was the norm. The modernization of national economies, however, has meant the demise of community-based scrip (Helleiner, 2002). More recently, a number of cities in the United States have seen the emergence of local currency schemes (or local exchange trading systems) designed to strengthen the local economy by stemming the outflow of money to distant locations and facilitating meaningful relationships between buyers and sellers.

The precise organizational characteristics of different systems vary, but the essential features are that the scheme is self-regulating and allows users to manage the money supply within a set of specified boundaries (normally a single municipality). Specially designated script serves as the means of exchange and participants negotiate the value they will attach to particular exchange transactions (organizers generally peg the value of a currency unit, and its exchange rate with conventional currency, according to the average hourly wage in the community).

Local currency systems began to develop a following in the early 1980s with the introduction of the first modern scheme on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. At present, there are an estimated sixty communities in the United States with some form of local currency, with especially vibrant systems operating in Ithaca, New York and Madison, Wisconsin (Shuman, 1998). What many of these cities share is a recognition that globalization is a doubled-edged sword and that local currency systems can ameliorate some of the dislocation and instability that frequently comes in its wake.

Consumer Credit

The use of consumer credit to drive the cycle of production and consumption in the United States is a relatively new phenomenon. The country's move away from a cash economy to a credit economy has enabled consumers to embrace the instantaneous gratification that comes from being able purchase goods without the need to save first for extended periods. An outcome of the widespread availability of credit cards, coupled with the endless enticements of mass consumerism, has contributed to an array of social problems associated with the accumulation of large personal debt loads and financial insolvency (Warren and Warren-Tyagi, 2003; Calder, 1999). The easy availability of consumer credit, often carrying exorbitant interest rates, contributed to a wave of

[33] As described by Cone and Myhre (2000), the CSA concept actually developed in Japan and Europe prior to coming to the United States. The first CSA in the country was established in western Massachusetts in 1985.

[34] So-called buying clubs, which are gaining in popularity in some cities, represent a variation of the essential CSA concept (Johnson, 2003b).

consumer activism during the late 1960s, and this political agitation gave rise to the first generation of modern consumer protection legislation. The most notable public policy initiative to curb unscrupulous purveyors of credit was the Consumer Credit Protection Act (CCPA) of 1968. In particular, the CCPA's so-called truth-in-lending provisions require lenders to state in clear language the terms and conditions of their offers.

Despite this groundbreaking legislation, the past thirty years have seen a massive accumulation of consumer debt in the United States. By 1999, per capita consumer debt had exceeded $30,000, nearly fifty percent more than it had been ten years earlier. Overall, American consumers are now in debt to the tune of $2 trillion dollars, with approximately one-third of this amount payable on high-interest credit cards. The typical American household carried forward each month $7,500 in unpaid credit card debt, a two-fold increase in just ten years. Thirteen percent of families in the United States have outstanding balances that exceed 40 percent of their household income, a situation that means 90 percent of each monthly payment is solely dedicated to paying interest. The inevitable outcome of this situation is an ever-mounting number of personal bankruptcies—more than 1.3 million in 1999 alone.

As vendors have saturated the credit card market, they have aggressively sought to cultivate new markets, especially among university students. These companies regularly organize carnival-type promotional events, complete with loud music, games, and gifts. Accordingly, thirty-two percent of undergraduate students had four or more credit cards in 2000, and the average overall credit card balance was more than $2,700. Nearly ten percent of these students owed more than $7,000 on their credit cards.[35]

In response to this dilemma, many universities now offer bankruptcy counseling to their students, and at all levels of education new courses in financial literacy have become part of the curriculum. There has even been new legislation to restrict campus access for credit card vendors and to tighten lending terms (USGAO, 2001). For instance, the College Student Credit Card Protection Act (CSCCPA) of 1999 imposes a number of new standards, including a restriction on issuing large-limit accounts to students, a prohibition on increasing credit limits without a parental co-signer, and a disallowance of open-ended consumer credit plans for full-time students with no annual income.

Conclusion

Though it is possible to point to various efforts to catalyze a new public dialogue about consumerism in American society, the question remains whether this inchoate activity has the potential to coalesce into a coherent social movement. It is probably too early to offer any firm assessments, but the mélange of initiatives described above does seem to denote a certain level of public discomfort in the United States—at least among some social segments—with contemporary mass consumption. Of noteworthy interest is that this unease does not stem primarily from concern about accumulating ecological harm, and environmental themes are at best peripheral considerations for Americans skeptical of consumerist lifestyles. In this sense, the oppositional political agenda developing around consumption in the United States is—at least for the moment—less about "sustainable" consumption than it is about "critical" consumption.

Public opinion polling has regularly demonstrated the prevalence of environmental values in the United States, but these sensibilities tend to be relatively shallow and superficial. For instance, environmental politics rarely plays a major role in determining the outcome of American elections, and few voters in the country cast their ballots according to candidates' environmental records.[36] For this reason, there is a certain futility in propounding a political program to address the growing social problematization of consumption in the United States with appeals to how environmental gains will derive from more purposive lifestyles. While the clumsiness that accompanies environmentalists' efforts to talk about consumption is evidence of some profound difficulties, scrappy organizations such as the Center for the New American Dream appear to have learned this lesson. To the extent that critical consumption matures as a domestic political discourse, it will almost invariably be driven by relatively prosaic concerns about, for instance, working hours, leisure time, and family life. An array of less tangible misgivings about the insidious affects of commercialism and the lack of authenticity engendered by consumerist lifestyles may also prove important.

All of this suggests that efforts to reconfigure consumption practices in the affluent countries will proceed along different trajectories, and will be conditioned in specific places by political culture and institutional constraints. It is difficult to imagine an American political administration, regardless of party affiliation, embracing a meaningful program to move the country toward alternative modes of consumption. The economic risks are simply too high and the political payoffs too elusive. Progress in the United States to realign consumption practices will come from a combination of social activism and targeted resistance, but first it will be necessary for the various strands of the nascent critical consumption movement to forge a common identity and to launch a new politics of consumption.

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[35] Nellie Mae, a quasi-government agency that issues education loans, conducts an annual survey of credit card usage among students. See the website http://www.nelliemae.com/library/research_8. html.

[36] The bizarre outcome that characterized the presidential election in 2000 is more an exception than the rule. George W. Bush's victory was, at least in part, attributable to the Green Party's ability in diverting several thousand votes from Vice-President Al Gore in Florida. Had Gore been able to secure even a few hundred of these ballots, he would have prevailed in Florida and the protracted controversy surrounding the election's outcome would have been averted.

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